

Engineer Battalion Headquarters Company Operations

By Captain Jerry McDaniel

Operation Iraqi Freedom has provided many opportunities for soldiers and units, from all military specialties, to operate outside of their normal lanes. Engineers soon learned that they had to adapt to emerging doctrine, assuming roles and missions not normally envisioned and learning to function as engineer teams and task forces. Even headquarters elements, such as Headquarters and Support Company (HSC), 203d Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Heavy), had to adapt to the new environment. HSC, 203d—a Missouri Army National Guard unit based in Joplin, Neosho, and Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri—deployed to Iraq in May 2003, serving there until early July 2004. Initially assigned to the 130th Engineer Brigade, the 203d was later attached to the 493d Engineer Brigade, 1st Armored Division, an Army Reserve unit from Dallas, Texas, whose area of operation was the greater Baghdad area.

Missions

The HSC mission was to provide personnel, operations, supply, food service, communications, medical maintenance, and heavy equipment support to the rest of the 203d. In addition to being involved in almost every task

assigned to the battalion, HSC was often deployed as a fourth maneuver element and undertook combat operations normally assigned to a combat engineer unit rather than a construction unit.

Support Missions

Within 48 hours of arrival, and during base camp construction, the company was on support missions in the city: the Baghdad Zoo reopening, trash cleanup, and an ongoing series of force protection and quality-of-life improvements for the units located in the Baghdad International Airport (BIAP) area. These support missions included removing tons of scrap metal; placing hundreds of yards of HESCO Bastion Container® walls; hauling gravel for unit motor pools; hauling away Iraqi missiles for destruction; and clearing trees, brush, and buildings away from the main road leading to the airport. Equipment operators also cleared trees to improve fields of fire and dug fighting positions for the armored vehicles guarding the airport. During these missions, HSC soldiers logged thousands of miles in Baghdad traffic—largely without assistance from combat units. They provided most of their own security during convoys and jobsite security missions as well.



Soldiers from the 203d and Army firefighters work at the bombed United Nations building in Baghdad.

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Equipment from the 203d is used to demolish buildings along an alternate supply route.

Construction Missions

As the Army leadership in Baghdad began to develop a deeper sense of what needed to be accomplished, the mission load for the engineers increased. In addition to the many small projects the battalion completed, several major missions were undertaken. These included construction of the West BIAP Camp, the Butler Range Complex, Camp Falcon, Camp Muleskinner, and Camp Victory, as well as Camp War Eagle and Camp Dragoon. HSC soldiers—whether equipment operators, surveyors, mechanics, or medics—had a hand in all of these major projects.

West BIAP Camp. This camp was the original home for the forces at BIAP, and the 203d was a major player in the establishment of the camp facilities. The battalion engineer officers were key planners in the development of the base, and the HSC survey section had the lead in developing the base camp survey plan and the supporting road network. The camp was later named Base Neusche, in honor of Specialist Joshua Neusche, an outstanding young HSC soldier who died early in the deployment.

Butler Range Complex. Located on a former Iraqi army installation, this complex was designed to allow 1st Armored Division to train on its weapons and maintain its combat skills. The 203d operations staff completed the design and material requirements. Engineers from across the battalion worked to construct the temporary living area, wooden barracks, earth berms, roads, and range facilities. The supply, food service, and medical sections provided support to the soldiers engaged in the construction. Later, HSC soldiers improved their own skills by training at the site. Convoy defense live-fire and

machine gun qualifications were conducted on the ranges. HSC equipment operators supported the 16th Engineer Battalion (Armored) in training exercises by digging and breaching defenses and fighting positions and participating in live-fire exercises.

Camp Falcon. As the mission load began to increase, HSC was tasked as a de facto fourth line company, assigned to handle operations in the southwest area of Baghdad. Camp Falcon was the home of the 2d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division. After completing the initial work assessment, the HSC equipment platoon was assigned the project lead. The mission, which started with the construction of two helicopter pads, soon turned into one of the largest base camp projects in Baghdad. After constructing the helicopter pads, the platoon hauled gravel and completed the motor pools within the camp. As the camp expanded, the platoon built roads for civilian vehicle traffic and access around the camp perimeter. The project included clearing and placing gravel for a soldier living area and

removing piles of construction debris along a 2-mile stretch of highway. When Bravo Company was later tasked to assume the operation, the project had expanded to include substantial vertical construction as well. Bravo Company engineers continued with extensive earthwork, constructed four wooden buildings, and oversaw Iraqi contractors on the construction of twelve concrete and brick barracks and a perimeter wall.

Camp Muleskinner. Designated as one of the primary base camps in Baghdad, HSC equipment platoon members were the first to arrive on-site. They bulldozed run-down buildings, placed protective berms around the camp, cleared fields of fire and observation for the camp defenses, and surveyed facilities for the establishment of a training site. After HSC completed several projects, Charlie Company was selected to lead the camp expansion. Charlie Company soldiers completed earthwork and force protection projects, renovated several buildings, and supervised Iraqi contractors on the construction of concrete and brick barracks.

Camp Victory. When the primary Baghdad camp moved from West BIAP, HSC soldiers surveyed an area that was later known as Camp Victory North. The battalion survey team directed surveyors from several units in establishing the baseline survey for the camp. Battalion staff members were key players in the camp development, laying out locations for housing units, motor pools, and roads. Parking lots, housing areas, and roads were soon cleared and constructed. The HSC concrete and dump truck sections supported the line companies, pouring concrete for building slabs and hauling gravel for life support areas and motor pools.



A 203d soldier helps Iraqi civilians remove debris from a refugee camp.

Heavy Equipment Missions

Several of the missions assigned were unusual for a construction unit, especially for a headquarters element. Shortly after arriving in theater, HSC used armored D9 bulldozers to destroy several buildings in an old Republican Guard compound along a supply route. Enemy forces hid out in these buildings to ambush convoys moving along the highway. Infantry support was not available, and military police assets were limited. The equipment platoon, supported by maintenance and medical personnel, moved to the site and deployed as an infantry force. They cleared and secured the buildings, then looked for mines and booby traps in the area. Once secured, construction equipment was brought in to clear several buildings, along with abandoned Iraqi fighting positions. Trees and brush were also cleared along the highway.

Another building demolition soon followed. Enemy forces were firing on the Baghdad South power plant, using the buildings outside the plant for cover. HSC soldiers coordinated with the security element, moved in, and demolished several of the buildings.

HSC also supported the 82d Airborne Division in raids against suspected terrorists, who used concrete and brick buildings and walls for cover and concealment. The D9 bulldozer operators were asked to assist, so they moved out with the night patrols and demolished some of the buildings and walls. With the help of the engineers, several suspected terrorists were caught during these operations.

When terrorists bombed the United Nations facility in Baghdad, HSC was tasked as the lead element for the recovery effort and was supported by Bravo Company and additional soldiers from across the battalion. The engineers loaded their



Engineer equipment was critical in the cleanup of this refugee camp.

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equipment that night and rolled out at first light. Relieving the first responders on the site, the engineers began a week-long, 24-hour-a-day mission to clear debris and then deployed rescue teams to search for survivors in the rubble. Coordinating with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the United Nations, Turkish civil defense personnel, and Coalition Provisional Authority representatives, the 203d removed the remains of the victims, removed and buried the rubble, and provided building security and media escorts. The battalion also provided medical, maintenance, supply, and force protection support to the other forces guarding the site and to United Nations employees. HSC directed efforts to re-establish water supplies to a neighboring hospital that had been disrupted after the attack.

The most difficult and dangerous mission was supporting the 1st Armored Division in the city of Karbala. Shia Muslim insurgents had killed a US military police officer and taken over a mosque and a group of buildings in the city. US forces were sent to the city in October, and the 203d was tasked to provide D9 bulldozers and additional construction equipment to support the infantry and help clear debris. HSC received the mission, and the engineer assault team, supported by maintenance and medical personnel, traveled through miles of empty desert and linked up with the assault forces in the city. They unloaded their equipment and moved against the enemy-held buildings within minutes of arrival. The enemy, confronted with overwhelming firepower and armor-plated bulldozers, gave up without firing a shot.

The battalion also put together an emergency response team, lead by the HSC executive officer. With additional heavy equipment, dump trucks, and combat engineers attached from another battalion, the team arrived in downtown Karbala that night and linked up with the other HSC soldiers at the attack site. The operation was completed that first night, but the team remained to support further operations and assist civil affairs teams in assessing the damage before returning to Baghdad.

Even as the company prepared to redeploy, the mission to support the infantry forces continued. In April, forces loyal to Muqtada al Sadr staged an uprising. Operators from the equipment platoon were tasked to support the 1st Cavalry Division in an operation to capture one of his subordinates. Once again, the construction engineers participated in night operations against hostile forces. Over several nights, the bulldozers were at work with the infantry and tanks, clearing building rubble from the fighting in the streets of Abu Ghuraib, in spite of the danger of enemy attack.

Entry Control Point Missions

When not engaged in construction work, the HSC equipment platoon and several technical engineer specialists ran an entry control point onto the airport. The task was difficult and potentially dangerous. Iraqi contractors hauled in the gravel, sand, concrete, and asphalt used in the construction of Camp Victory, and the vehicles—sometimes more than 600 a day—and drivers had to be searched for weapons and explosives. The quality of the construction materials also had to be checked. This work was often frustrating and challenging. Most of the Iraqis were from Abu Ghuraib and Fallujah, long hotbeds of anti-American activity. It took considerable time and effort for the two sides to learn to work together. The soldiers earned the respect of the Iraqis because of their respectful but no-nonsense approach to running the operation. Many Iraqis were quick to fight each other with fists and lead pipes, so the HSC soldiers had to break up the fights, often arresting the antagonists and taking them to the local police station.

Battalion Support Missions

While the rest of the battalion was out on missions, other HSC soldiers provided the necessary support base for the battalion.

Food Service. The food service section ran operations at Base Neusche and the Butler Range Complex until the contract dining facilities were established. The section resumed operations later when the battalion deployed to Camp Duke, outside of An Najaf.

Logistics, Personnel, and Communications. In addition to the survey work, the battalion staff elements planned the logistics, personnel, and communications support for the battalion. At one point, the logistic section operated the largest construction supply yard in the city, with lumber, wire, plumbing, and roofing supplies.

Medical. The medical section provided medical support to three other engineer battalions, the engineer brigade and group, and personnel passing through the West BIAP Camp.

Maintenance. All company and battalion operations would have been impossible without the work of the HSC, and battalion operations would have been impossible without the work of the company and direct support maintenance sections. Maintenance teams deployed to the field to support every major mission. The remaining mechanics performed a wide variety of services from repairing broken belts to changing engines on construction equipment. The maintenance sections maintained the pace of operations, despite a shortage of spare parts. No mission failed due to a lack of available equipment, and equipment services were completed on or ahead of schedule.

Humanitarian Projects. The 203d also played a role in humanitarian efforts to rebuild the country. The battalion directed Task Force Wisdom, a project to rebuild schools in Baghdad that included both US engineers and Iraqi contractors. They renovated 16 Iraqi schools and assessed 12 more. The project also established a standard operating procedure for similar projects across Iraq. HSC soldiers conducted clean-up efforts at a refugee camp. They also provided medical aid, supplies, food, and shoes to needy Iraqis around the city. These items were donated by family members of the 203d and the Neosho, Missouri, Junior High School.

Deployment Extension Missions

The most emotionally difficult mission the 203d soldiers faced was the extension past their 1-year anniversary. They had already packed and shipped home much of their equipment and personal items when they received word that they would remain in theater. Moving out of the base camp in Baghdad, HSC headed into the desert outside of An Najaf. HSC and Alpha Company established Camp Duke to support 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment (Light) operations against al Sadr's forces. HSC took the lead on the base camp force protection measures, constructing protective berms and ditches around the camp. In addition to construction work, the company manned the entry control point, provided a quick-reaction force, and conducted the reconnaissance and surveillance patrols that kept potential enemy forces away from the camp and the adjacent ammunition supply point. These missions required close coordination with civilian contract security personnel and Iraqi police, who shared responsibility for the site. Over a 2-month period, the battalion built or expanded camps in An Najaf, Diwaniyah, and Al Kut.

While at Camp Duke, HSC also took responsibility for the regiment's detainee facility. A platoon of combat engineers from the Minnesota Army National Guard was attached to the company to conduct the mission. The facility received high marks from inspectors for its security, the care provided to the detainees, and the professionalism of the soldiers who operated it.

Conclusion

As the high pace of operations continues across the globe, more units will be performing missions and operating in ways that they had not expected. Soldiers and commanders will need to anticipate requirements and concentrate on basic warfighting skills, never assuming that a mission is outside their lane. In operations across Iraq, HSC soldiers from the 203d Engineer Battalion performed with agility and flexibility. They never hesitated to take on new missions outside of established doctrine and built a solid record of performance and accomplishment.

Captain McDaniel commands Headquarters and Support Company, 203d Engineer Battalion (Missouri Army National Guard). Previous assignments include engineer platoon leader, battalion S1, engineer equipment officer, engineer brigade staff officer, and the Joint Task Force Alaskan Road staff.